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Major breakthrough?

... but was the Walker ring big time?

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WASHINGTON — John Walker Jr., who never rose higher than warrant officer in the Navy, is being portrayed in some reports as a spy on a par with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in the early 1950s for providing atomic secrets to the Soviets.

Some descriptions have suggested that he may have been a master spy, who may have compromised some of the nation's most precious military secrets.

But the record is far from complete on Walker and his alleged spy ring, three weeks after his May 19 arrest on espionage charges.

Many key questions remain unanswered and for that reason it may be worth reviewing what is known, and what is not known, on the basis of investigative reports so far, most of them from the FBI.

Shocking as the story that has unfolded so far may be, it is far from certain at this early stage how big a deal the alleged Walker spy ring may have been, or how much damage it may have done to the national security.

There is no evidence so far, for example, that Walker was anything more than a small-time operator, with big-time ideas. He may have been, but we don't know.

None of Walker's reported sources of information ever operated at the top levels of the Navy. All, including himself, operated at middle and lower levels.

Despite repeated FBI assertions that Walker was motivated by "greed," there is no evidence that he got rich.

And there is no hard evidence that the kinds of information he is alleged to have passed to the Soviets over a period of years has seriously compromised the most important element of the nation's nuclear deterrent power — its strategic submarine force.

His access to important information was exclusively in the area of communications — techniques and codes used in the Navy for communicating between command centers and submarines or other major warships.

Most of this kind of information is highly perishable in the Navy. Codes and systems can be changed rela-

tively easily.

As for Walker's profits, he lived in a modest lower middle-class neighborhood in Norfolk, Va., and ran what appears to have been a less-than-successful private detective business as a cover for his alleged spying.

No convincing evidence of great wealth has been produced so far in the case, although the FBI is continuing an exhaustive search for his total assets.

The most extravagant estimate of his income from spying so far has come from his ex-wife, Barbara, who turned him in to the FBI. She told a local newspaper on Cape Cod, Mass., where she now lives, that he may have made as much as \$100,000 over a 10-year period.

As for the damage done, it has been described only in generalized terms by the Navy and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. The real extent of damage remains unanswered.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. James D. Watkins said losses appeared to be "very serious," but "not catastrophic." But he refused to provide details.

Weinberger told reporters a few

days ago: "We are not going into any detail as to the nature of the loss ... because we don't want to give any further aid and comfort to the Soviets."

Both Weinberger and Watkins insisted there has been no compromise to the security of the nation's 37 strategic submarines, which have been considered the only invulnerable part of U.S. strategic forces.

Some CIA veterans have publicly questioned this assessment, arguing that the Soviets may have obtained enough information about U.S. communications techniques to have gained important leads toward locating strategic submarines.

But a possible lead is not a breakthrough. No one has alleged that the Soviets have made a major breakthrough.

In the end, more may be established about the scope of the alleged Walker ring and the amount of damage it may have done to American security. But on the record so far, Walker was not so much a big-time operator as he was a small-time poser seeking to make a few fast bucks.

And we can only hope that that's as far as it went.